

Seminar D NWC  
Essay  
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**ANWAR ES-SADAT:**

"For a while at least, it was a time for Egyptians to exult."

- Tawfik el-Hakim

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18 September, 1992

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Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
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1. REPORT DATE <b>SEP 1992</b>		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED <b>00-09-1992 to 00-09-1992</b>	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE <b>Anwar Sadat and the October War: Breaking the Deadlock</b>				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) <b>National War College, 300 5th Avenue, Fort Lesley J. McNair, Washington, DC, 20319-6000</b>				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT <b>Approved for public release; distribution unlimited</b>					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT <b>see report</b>					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES <b>11</b>	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT <b>unclassified</b>	b. ABSTRACT <b>unclassified</b>	c. THIS PAGE <b>unclassified</b>			

## **ANWAR SADAT AND THE OCTOBER WAR:**

### **BREAKING THE DEADLOCK**

"A master of deception will tell you the truth - the whole truth, but he may tell it in such a way that no one will believe it." - Anonymous

We often look for a single defining event which properly characterizes a great statesman's ability to shape world events. As the legacy of Anwar Sadat, the events leading up to the 1973 Arab-Israeli War bear the distinctive mark of a master statesman, capable of using all aspects of national power to achieve his strategic objectives. The October War shows Sadat at his finest, able to support national interests while in possession of little apparent power, able to find opportunities where others only saw constraints, able to prioritize objectives and fit them carefully into a courageous plan of action. His success in the October War broke the deadlock between Egypt and Israel and cleared a path for a greater reconciliation and the potential for peace.

### **A Bleak Inheritance.**

The strategic situation which Sadat inherited from Nasser could not have been more bleak to many observers. Egypt's tremendous setback in the 1967 war and failure in the 1969 war of attrition reinforced the vision of a toothless adversary incapable of wielding the military tool to its benefit. The Arab cause was shattered by successive failure and splintered by factional infighting. Israel stood atop the heap of Middle Eastern politics with no incentive for diplomatic action on the gains its army had won.

Yet in less than a year, the situation was dramatically reversed. Egyptian pride and military success buoyed the Arab world and astounded the West. Israel stood isolated and alone, shocked by military calamity no one thought possible. The West was economically wounded by a weapon of its own addiction. And at the center of this astounding reversal stood Anwar Sadat, a master statesman of historic proportions. As we look at each step in this masterful turnabout, we will see the imprint of an expert in strategy, a master of "the art of the possible".

### **Assumptions.**

On his accession to Egyptian leadership, Sadat was forced to concentrate on two interests, the national interest of regaining Egyptian territory and prestige lost in 1967, and the personal interest of securing his tentative hold on the reins of Egyptian power. In each challenge, Sadat saw new openings. Sadat chose to balance the threat of Israeli power, taking its clear form in the armed occupation of formerly Egyptian territory, against the threat of internal instability, taking the form of sedition and coup-plotting among domestic opponents on the right and the left. At the same time, Sadat understood the threat of superpower detente as the quicksand which could hold Egypt in its currently unacceptable position.

The balance of power in the Middle East of 1972 counterpoised a militarily and economically weak Egypt against a strong and seemingly impervious Israel. The Arab world was fractured between revolutionary and monarchical governments. The

superpowers seemed about to impose a solution based on these realities. Sadat was in a race against time, with few options and little real power. But everyone overlooked Sadat's skillful ability to wield diplomatic, economic, and psychological tools to gain time and leverage for the successful debut of a renewed Egyptian military might. In the end, he employed each tool marvelously, with boldness in leadership and clarity of purpose.

### **Opportunities in the Guise of Constraints.**

Sadat's constraints were manifold. Egyptian military inferiority was a proven commodity. Sadat also faced a pronounced political and economic weakness based on a history as an underdeveloped yet exploited country. Egypt had not recovered from the military disaster of 1967. Large infusions of Soviet aid were aimed more at buying Egypt's allegiance than building an offensive capability. Indeed, the Soviets feared the loss of control such offensive capability might bring.

At the same time Sadat faced domestic constraints on the political and economic fronts. As the heir to Nasser, Sadat retained a modicum of political support, yet was assailed from the right as a tool of the Soviets and from the left as a friend of decadent monarchies. Egypt enjoyed no direct benefit from Arab oil and, with the closing of the Suez canal, her major source of hard currency was gone.

Sadat found opportunities in these same constraints. When combined with the great diplomatic power he held as the ostensible leader of the Arab world and the psychological power

he deftly gathered as the aggrieved leader attempting to right a terrible wrong, the entire world underestimated his power arsenal. Sadat viewed the widespread perception of military weakness as a potential tool against the Israelis, whom he might be able to lull into a sense of complacency and inattentiveness, and as leverage against the Soviets, whom he could embarrass and needle into providing the advanced arms necessary to rebuild Egyptian military potential.

Domestically, Sadat saw the opportunity to coopt his opponents on the right by changing the Soviet-Egyptian relationship. Yet, he initially reacted more forcefully to the opponents on the left, jailing leftist students and journalists who sought to endanger his special and needed relationship with more conservative (and wealthy) Arab countries.

These wealthy Arab countries served as a tremendous source of capital to an economically strapped Egypt. Here, Sadat's personal diplomatic initiatives planted the seeds of success which he harvested in the form of increased Saudi and Gulf state money for the front-line Arab states. Sadat cultivated the leaders of the wealthy Arab countries and ensured their political and financial support for his confrontation with Israel. At the same time he saw the vast potential for their leverage with the industrial West, using the weapon which had created their wealth, oil.

Sadat also successfully targeted the Organization of African Unity and the Non-Aligned Movement as potential sources of diplomatic power in his overall plan for the isolation of Israel.

Finally, Sadat built a basis for psychological power of significant proportions. His eviction of the Soviet advisors, externally viewed as a capitulation to internal politics, became a tremendous psychological lever in playing both superpowers' fears against each other. His continued calls for battle raised his stock within the Arab world and lulled the usually wary Israelis.

### **Objectives and Priorities.**

As Sadat put his plan of action together he faced clear choices in objectives and priorities. These objectives included:

- 1) retaking and holding part of the Sinai,
- 2) inflicting heavy human, material, and psychological losses on Israel, and
- 3) heightening the concern of the superpowers, preferably to place diplomatic pressure on Israel for a negotiated solution.<sup>1</sup>

Only when these intermediate objectives were achieved could Sadat feel comfortable that his ultimate objective, a negotiated return of the occupied lands, would be possible.<sup>2</sup>

Within these objectives, Sadat clearly laid out several priorities of action. He needed time to prepare his military forces and allow for the lulling of the Israelis and the superpowers. Diplomatically, he had to simultaneously seek to isolate Israel and rally Arab and international support for the Egyptian cause. Through each of these steps he had to play the superpowers off against each other in order to preclude their unwanted intervention before he was ready to initiate his

military action.

### **Plan of Action.**

Sadat's basic plan of action involved three steps:

- 1) isolating his opponent diplomatically while building international consensus for the Arab cause,
- 2) preparing Egypt militarily and politically for war,
- 3) at the right time, initiating military action which would force Israel to the negotiating table (with Egypt as an equal).

Sadat recognized that he needed a military situation which he could call a victory and Israel would recognize as a threat. He held no false conception that Israel, or the superpowers, would help the Egyptians if they had no ability to help themselves.<sup>3</sup>

Sadat also saw which tools of statecraft were necessary to achieve his aims. Persuasion would work best with his brother Arabs and the non-aligned countries. Coercive diplomacy, in the form of a threatened oil embargo, would bring Europe and Japan along. Only force could convince Israel to change its stance.

### **Success Beyond Expectations.**

The success of Sadat's strategy exceeded even his own somewhat grand expectations. In retrospect, he can rightly claim to have been the architect of a great victory, but it is difficult to believe that even he envisioned the great success he would achieve.

Sadat initiated his plan of action with a dramatic gesture



which was misinterpreted by the international community and misunderstood by his own domestic enemies. The sudden eviction of nearly 15,000 Soviet advisors led the U.S. to wrongly believe Sadat had completely rejected Soviet assistance and therefore could not possibly fight Israel. In actuality, this move allowed him to gain more leverage against the Soviets and led them to increase their assistance, especially in the modern military arms Sadat's plan required. Domestically, the eviction gained Sadat support from the conservative right by showing his independence from the Soviets. In addition, he gained freedom of action to prepare for the war without constant oversight and interference, and he evaded the potential of a Soviet veto against his design.

In preparing his military for the war, Sadat understood that time was working against him. With a U.S. presidential election recently completed, Nixon might again seek a resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict based on the status quo. From Sadat's view, Brezhnev might be all too willing. This solution was clearly unacceptable. Sadat chose a dual path to success. Militarily, he pressed hard for arms, training, and plans to make certain of his minimal goals. At the same time, his nearly monthly statements that "now was the time for the battle of destiny"<sup>4</sup> worked to stimulate his own forces while lulling the Israelis and the rest of the world into not listening to the latest bombast.

Diplomatically, Sadat scrambled to gather support for his cause and prepare his fellow Arab nations for the debut of their powerful oil weapon. Through his deft handling of the Arab

states, the Organization of African Unity, and the Non-Aligned Movement, he ensured that when the time came for military action Israel stood alone and isolated.<sup>5</sup> Sadat understood he could not remove U.S. support for Israel, but by moving the rest of the world against Israel he forced the U.S. to use its leverage to push Israel toward a negotiated solution.

Some have criticized Sadat for being unprepared to follow up his tactical success in the Sinai by attempting to move forward toward Tel Aviv. I cannot fault him. Sadat's army achieved all he asked of it and more. Sadat's goal was to make the Israelis question their concept of security, to fear for their security but not necessarily their existence. By achieving the former, he might gain a willing negotiating partner; the latter would stiffen Israeli resistance and could ultimately lead to superpower interference.

Sadat also knew his limitations. He recognized when events were no longer within his control militarily and acquiesced to the cease fire then being offered by Israel and backed by the superpowers. His military "victory" had already secured him the strategic advantage at the negotiating table.

### **The Lessons for the Future.**

The lessons we can take from Sadat's moves in preparation for the October War are many, but we will focus on only three - strategic deception, the proper use of military force, and the synergistic use of diplomatic, economic, and military tools.

Sadat's deceptions clearly remind us that conclusions based

on assumptions are not facts. Throughout Sadat's preparations for war, we and the rest of the world were blinded by the obvious, and we therefore ignored it.<sup>6</sup> Sadat's strategic deception led to Israel's strategic dislocation.

Sadat showed us a proper and restrained use of military force in order to achieve a diplomatic breakthrough. In the words of Henry Kissinger,

"Rare is the statesman who at the beginning of a war has so clear a perception of its political objective; rarer still is a war fought to lay the basis for moderation in its aftermath."<sup>7</sup>

Finally, Sadat demonstrated how the various tools of national power - military, economic, and diplomatic - can be combined in a synergistic fashion, thereby greatly exceeding the sum of their parts. By taking perceived weaknesses and turning them into strategic assets, Sadat elevated the psychological aspects of national power to a new height.

Sadat's legacy in the October War is perhaps best described by Egypt's most distinguished intellectual, Tawfik el-Hakim.

"The profound meaning of October 6 is not merely a military victory or a material crossing, as much as it is a spiritual crossing to a new state in our history . . . and that stage is the reconstruction of our civilization."<sup>8</sup>

#### ENDNOTES

1. O'Neill, Bard F. "The October War: A Political Military Assessment," Air University Review (July-August, 1974), p. 32.
2. es-Sadat, Anwar. "The October War". In Search of an Identity: An Autobiography (New York: Harper and Rowe, 1977) p. 244.
3. Ibid, p. 238.
4. O'Neill, p. 27.

5. Ibid, p. 31.

6. Kissinger, Henry. "Why We Were Surprised", Years of Upheaval (Boston: Little, Brown, 1982), pp. 465-467.

7. Ibid, p. 460.

8. Baker, Raymond William. Egypt's Uncertain Revolution Under Nasser and Sadat. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 131.